cares. But when there's a million dollars invested, you've got to make the return on the investments. I mean, I don't think *Electric Minds* will have any trouble at all providing a place for Howard to teach, and for him to bring in his friends to teach. If we do nothing else, if we only build up a structure to present some valuable discussions, that'll be great from my perspective. If the investors can step back and say, "Oh I can visit *Electric Minds* and learn something. And there's schools all over the country using the material." But I think whether the investors make their money back will be the main source of tension.

HR: Wouldn't it be great if Americans supported the artists with their tax dollars? Wouldn't it be great if we didn't have to sell ads in order to pay people decently? If you're an artist in the Netherlands, the money appears in your bank account every month. Of course, there's a 60% income tax rate. Americans don't like to pay taxes for anything other than basic services. I mean, we're closing down *fire departments.*

RU: Well, government handouts haven't *ended* fire so... [*laughter*]

HR: So, the question, is this commodification? Yes it is. I wish it didn't have to be. What's the solution? The working classes are going to revolt and set up a dictatorship of the proletariat and then resources will be allocated fairly? I mean...

RU: But just looking at it from a really broad perspective, not taking it so personally. Looking at the amount of money being made off the Net and the Web, the value that's accrued to Netscape and Yahoo! and Microsoft. Contrast that with the value being put into this system by content providers and what *we're* getting in return. Shouldn't some of this money go back in the other direction? It could be a resolution to the unemployment problem... lots of people paid to be content providers...

HR: Yeah, I like the idea. We're trying to do just that. It starts with a minority of people being paid to make great conversation. That's a start.

The whole idea of The River is exactly that. The people who make the conversation, which is the content, which is the product, own and govern it. It's a co-op.

Of course, the thing is that co-ops are really raucous and endlessly argumentative. Endless boring arguments till the only people left are the ones who like to argue.

Either way, there's problems. I think one thing that's uniquely American is that we think that problems have solutions.

VJ: But one of the things I love here is that every time I come to work, something new happens that changes how you think about things. Different approaches to design. Things come up that I wouldn't think of if it weren't for the creative environment and collaboration. Things happen in your brain that wouldn't ordinarily happen. It's why I like drugs and it's why I like collaborations. The people around you modify your brain. M2

CYBERSPACE COMMODITY

AN INTERVIEW WITH HUMDOG

humdog, or Carmen Hermosillo, has been driving people absolutely insane on The Well and other bulletin boards for years with her unpopular opinions, her unalloyed directness, her prickly exasperation with women-as-victims, and her very distinctive deconstructionist style. Some say she's just flatout illogical, but I've always found her to be one of the more insightful voices on the net.

Now she's putting together an organization to represent people who have a particular talent for generating web content, people whose economic interests have not been represented up to this point. Her mission statement says that she will be "handling people who have track records specific to new media and cyberspace."

She has described herself as "a fourth-generation Latin American anarchist" and "one of the thirty-six immortal poison pens of cyberspace."

—R.U. Sirius

R.U. Sirius: You've written a controversial essay in Peter Ludlow's book, *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier* in which you portray virtual community as a kind of scam that particularly rips off the more vocal participants. You've been a pretty vocal participant online yourself. How did you come to your conclusions?

humdog: I think that what I noticed most in my time on the Net over the last few years was that the issue of the value of content and content providers was never addressed. It seemed to me more and more evident that there was an assumption that content should just be provided, or worse, that people should *pay* for the privilege of providing it. In the "pandora's vox" essay, I began to address that issue by pointing out how interaction is commodified on the Net.

Then I noticed that whereas tech people made comfortable livings, content people for the most part did not. And yet, tech and content, on the net, exist in synergy. That synergy has been mostly ignored.

So finally it came to me: I had to raise consciousness about the importance of content providers. There is too much information on the web. The web has essentially annihilated

information, and people who do not understand the requirements of writing for the net will be buried alive in the avalanche. So I decided to start an agency for content providers—people who have track records in cspace. Many of these cspace writers are more well known on the net than they are in print. This isn't surprising, though, because print and net are as different as

LURKERS ARE IN THE MAJORITY; THEY ARE THE SPECTATORS AND THE AUDIENCE

codex and book; it's a completely different form of communication. So I decided I would make this agency so that those people who really wanted their net and multi-media content to work would have access to those writers who understood the medium.

It was just that simple. You just can't do new media like you do the older forms. It's a completely different literary form, a completely different aesthetic. Most people don't get that.

RU: We've been talking to Howard Rheingold and some of the *Electric Minds* people. Do you see yourself in a kind of opposition to their idealistic, or perhaps naïve, vision of online community?

H: I do not oppose *Electric Minds*. I just disagree with its assumptions. First, I think that information-shop-keepers might want to think about less being more. In cspace everything changes very quickly. So quickly, I think, that the whole idea of "early-adopter" is going to become meaningless very soon, largely due to the *variety* of developments that will become available. Market segments are going to become very tiny, even for narrowcasters. Already you can see that occuring if you look.

Also, again with the content thing. It just strikes me as absurd to think that people will show up just for the joy of giving away stuff. Conversational systems appear to require sacrificial victims—you need people on these systems who are available for exploitation; people who are new to the Net, who have great minds and who have no idea of the value of what they're giving away. The more people become aware of the value of their contributions, the less likely they are to contribute.

The only way I see online conferencing working in the future is as a real conferencing tool for very small, specialized working groups of people with common interests, or as a big board where a certain percentage of the contributors are paid for contributing a certain number of postings per week.

I mean really, if somebody gave me a million dollars to set up a system, I would spend a big chunk of the money assuring that there was a very high level of quality content easily available and accessible to lurkers. Lurkers are in the majority; they are the spectators and the audience. I would make sure that they got a good show, and I would do the quality control myself.

RU: Your piece in Peter Ludlow's book caused a lot of controversy, partly because it raised this whole issue of the so-called Cyber Cad that generated so much publicity and heat on The Well there a few years ago. But leaving that aside, why do you think pointing out that community is being commodified created such a hostile reaction?

H: I know about the fuss. I got letters, and at least one topic was started in honor of the Vox article to make sure that I tasted of their Displeasure. Some of the stuff I read was quite vitriolic, but on the whole lacked style. And the most incendiary stuff tended to be written by those who had been least successful in commodifying themselves. Go figure.

Cspace and computer technology in general is sort of a California-based mythology and paradigm. Because it's Californian, it almost *has* to contain elements of utopian thinking, because California has been the last refuge of American utopian social thought for at least the last hundred years. Cspace, in lots of ways, has brought exchange value not only to social interaction (which is what I said in the Vox) but it also, by making social utopianism into a commodity, destroyed the concept of the Romantic Utopia. Pointing this out to people is not likely to make them very happy, particularly if they're longterm subscribers. I could go even further with this, and say that a case could be made for looking at the whole online deal as a form of modernist spiritual practice, or sanctification of sorts, because people act as if they believe that putting information into a machine somehow changes it, as if a kind of electronic transubstantiation had taken place. They put regular ol' them into the conferencing system, and a new, more perfect simulation of them emerges from the system. It is a sign value thing. Truly. Only in cspace can one do that, but the road to this slippery ID place was prepared by advertising.

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